

# STUDENT' S ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Abstract

Students' Engagement in School has been the focus of debate concerning academic success and school dropout, and pointed out as a mean to address the problems affecting our schools and their students, not only for having value in itself, but also for being an important mediator between several academic variables. This paper reviews the research and literature on this concept and its relations with personal and contextual variables, as well as with academic performance, with the aim of summarizing the main relationships found. Literature presents a significant number of studies which sustain that personal variables, such as self-efficacy and self-concept, as well as contextual - peers, school, family- are related with school engagement. The adoption of mastery goals, for instance, has a positive impact on school, as they are related with the use of cognitive and self-regulatory strategies by students. Positive relationships with peers, teachers support and the quality of family relations are associated with higher levels of engagement and academic performance, while negative experiences, such as bullying, are related with educational difficulties. Following this, we reflect about the relevance of studying engagement in school, in the context of widespread financial crisis, and emphasize the need to rethink educational institutions considering the paradigmatic changes that currently occur.

Keywords: Students' Engagement in School, Personal Variables, Contextual Variables, Academic Outcomes, Intervention

## 1 STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL: THE CONCEPT IN THE LITERATURE

This paper presents a literature review on the concept of *Students' Engagement in School*, which, following previous works (Veiga et al., 2012) [1], we define as the centripetal experience of bonding the student to the school, in specific dimensions, such as cognitive, affective, behavioral and agency (the student as an agent of action). Students' Engagement in School has been operationalized so as to value the extent to which students are committed to school and motivated to learn (Simon-Morton & Chen, 2009; Veiga et al., 2012) [2] [1]. Overall, there is an agreement concerning its multidimensional nature, and is often presented as a meta-construct, with two to four dimensions (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012) [3].

A substantial number of references in this domain express engagement in three types of dynamically related dimensions: cognitions, emotions, and behaviours (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003) [4] [5] [6]. The cognitive dimension refers to the students' personal investment (Ainley, 1993) [7], as well as learning approaches and self-regulatory strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004) [4], and is operationalized as perceptions and beliefs about the self, school and colleagues, also including self-efficacy strategies, motivations and academic aspirations (Jimerson et al., 2003) [6]. The emotional dimension – or psychological, another denomination preferred by authors such as Appleton et al. (2008) [8], Glanville and Wildhagen (2007) [5], Harris (2008) [9], and Marks (2000) [10] – is related to the sense of identification with school

(Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Voelkl, 1997) [11] [12], emotional reactions aroused by school, colleagues and teachers (Goodnow, 1993) [13], school connection and sense of belonging to school (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder 2001) [14]. The behavioural dimension is defined by the actions and practices directed towards learning and school, encompassing several conducts (Fredricks et al., 2004; Veiga, 2012) [4] [15]. Other authors (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Veiga et al., in press) [16] [17] present another component, *agency*, conceptualized as students' constructive contribution to the course of instruction they receive. The relationship between engagement and motivation is still and also a topic of extensive debate and research. Motivation is perceived in terms of direction, intensity and quality of the energy exhibited (Maehr & Meyer, 1997) [18].

## 2 STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT AND CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES

The inclusion of contextual elements within the analyses of students' engagement in school is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979), which highlights the impact of proximal environments (microsystem) to individual development. It will be considered the relationship between students' engagement in school and peer group, school and family contexts.

### 2.1 Engagement and Peer Group Context

The relevance of peer relations, especially during adolescence (Berndt, 1999; Rubin, Bukowski, Parker, & Bowker, 2008) [19] [20], is notoriously underlined in literature. The perception of peer support is positively related with school outcomes and adjustment (Buhs & Ladd, 2001) [21], academic motivation (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, McNamara-Barry, & Caldwell, 2004) [22] [23] [24] and pro-social behaviours (Wentzel et. al, 2004) [24]. Positive relationships contribute to fulfill belonging and attachment needs (Juvonen, 2007; Wentzel, 1999; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Ryan, 1993) [25] [26] [27] [28], and foster important emotions for adaptive functioning in school context (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Connell & Wellborn, 1991) [29] [30].

Several dimensions of self-concept may be affected by negative relations with the peers group (Juvonen et al., 2000) [31]. Rejection (Buhs, 2005) [32], aggressions and bullying (Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009) [33] result in lower engagement in school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Keefe & Berndt, 1996; Veiga, 2012) [23] [34] [15]; thus, disengagement may represent a reaction to negative peer treatment (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Veiga, 2012) [21] [15].

### 2.2 Engagement and School Context

School's organizational, instructional and social climate has been showed to have impact on engagement and academic performance (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Ryan & Patrick, 2001) [35] [36], although the influence pathways of these three types of engagement remain to be elucidated.

Learning climate is regarded as having a significant impact on engagement, as a result of teacher's beliefs and behaviours; support to students' autonomy, as well as the opportunity to participate in decisions concerning academic tasks (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000) [37] promote engagement, as they allow the practice of decision making and self-regulating abilities, and assign students the responsibility to influence the learning environment (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) [30]. While dialogue encourages students to metacognitively reflect about their learning (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) [38], teacher support has been associated with several indicators of behavioural engagement, namely, high participation in school related activities (Birch & Ladd, 1997) [39] and decrease of disruptive behaviours (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Veiga, 2012) [36] [15].

### 2.3 Engagement and Family Context

Numerous researchers have been studying the institutional influences, such as family, and its impact on school experiences (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012, in Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012) [40]. sociocultural status and the ethnic group of origin appear often to influence both students' performance and school trajectory (Laird, Lew, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006; Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007) [41] [42]. A review of studies in this area, conducted by Borkowski and Thorpe (1994) [43], found that students from lower sociocultural status families tend to present more negative views of themselves, school, career, and life in general.

Family models represent an important influence on self-efficacy, but also their capital and resources are significant determinants of students' engagement (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) [44]. These last

concern to material aspects, such as incomes; human resources, for instance education; and social resources, the relationship network (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) [44]. In addition, the quality of parental relationships has been associated with engagement in school (Chen, 2008) [45], academic performance (Furrer & Skinner, 2003) [23], academic achievement (Hughes & Kwok, 2007) [46], and satisfaction with school (Huebner & Diener, 2008) [47]. Parental demands are related with behaviour within the classroom (De Bruyn, Dekovic, & Meijnen, 2003) [48]. The type of parental authority, particularly the authoritative, seems to act, during adolescence, as a protective factor for initiation in behavioural problems (Simons-Morton & Haynie, 2002; Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Veiga, 2012) [49] [50] [15].

### 3 STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT AND PERSONAL VARIABLES

Students' individual differences, likely to influence engagement in school, still deserve more attention from researchers. Certain personal characteristics, such as race, social class, or sex, seem to relate with students' engagement in school. Furthermore, moments of school transition, the type of goal orientation adopted in learning and future orientation, self-efficacy, self-concept, subjective well-being and life satisfaction add on this pool of variables.

Several studies on engagement have found differences in gender (Lam et al., 2012) [51], sense of belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodnow, 1993) [23] [13] and satisfaction with school, favourable to girls (Ghazvini & Khajepour, 2011; Lam et al., 2012; Smith, Ito, Gruenewald, & Yeh, 2010) [52] [51] [53]. However, it is admitted that the differences found may be due to contextual variables, namely, school and teachers characteristics (Smith, Ito, Gruenewald, & Yeh, 2010) [53], or the school domain (e.g., literature or mathematics) which constitutes the analyses context (Ghazvini & Khajepour, 2011) [52].

Some differences may also be found in literature in what concerns engagement across school years. Klem and Connell (2004) [54] suggest that students' engagement decreases as they progress from elementary to middle school and from this to high school.

School transition is, according to Reschly and Christenson (2006) [55], probable to impact on students' engagement in school and learning. Transition to middle school has been related with an increase in psychological stress (Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987) [56] [57], lower self-esteem (Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991) [58], a decrease in academic achievement (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Simmons & Blyth, 1987) [59] [60] and motivation (Harter, 1981) [61].

A few studies grounded in achievement goal theory (Elliott, 1999) [62] assume that the motives (mastery/competence/learning goals vs. performance goals) students have to carry out tasks have effect on their level of engagement, since they influence the cognitive strategies employed in learning situations, by means of two important factors, *competence perception in academic context* (self-efficacy - Bandura, 1986; 1997; 2001) [63] [64] [65], and *instrumentality perception*.

Miller and Brickman (2004) [66] reviewed the work of numerous authors (Marcus & Nurius, 1986; 1985; Nuttin, 1984; Raynor, 1974) about motivation and suggest that the personal valuation of future goals promote the recognition of tasks importance for achieving those goals, which, in turn, has impact on engagement (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) [67]. In the same line of ideas, Shell and Husman (2001) [68] concluded that students who relate school subjects with the desired profession present superior cognitive skills and greater engagement in learning objectives and tasks.

Academic self-concept can be defined as the student's perception about his own school performance (Reyes, 1984) [69], including two aspects of self-perception, a descriptive and an evaluative one. Another definition (Veiga, 2012) [15], understands academic self-concept as the perception students have about themselves as students and also about themselves in relation to the others, within school context. Ghazvini (2011) [70] studied the relationship between academic self-concept and academic performance, and verified that the first positively predicts general performance in literature and mathematics.

Reschly, Huebner, Appleton and Antaramian (2008) [71] investigated the role of positive emotions related with school, coping and student's engagement in a sample of 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. They found a relation between positive emotions and higher levels of cognitive engagement in school, association which is partially mediated by adaptive coping.

## 4 STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Academic outcomes, understood as achievement and school behaviour, have been related with students' level of engagement in school (Finn, Pannozzo, & Voelkl, 1995) [72], in different age groups (Finn & Rock, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990) [73] [29] [74]. Overall, engagement has been associated with academic achievement (Li, Bebiroglu, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2008; Marks, 2000) [75] [10], learning (Ainley, 1993; Miller, Greene, Montalvo, Ravindran, & Nichols, 1996) [6] [76], school results and performance in standardized tests (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Finn & Rock, 1997) [77] [73], and rates of school completion, being found statistically significant relationships, in the expected direction, between the different dimensions of engagement and these variables.

Li, Lerner and Lerner (2010) [78] observed the role of school engagement as a mediator between resourceful environment and academic competence, and found that resources indirectly influence academic competence, through behavioural and emotional engagement. In turn, the disengagement from school is understood by many authors (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Li, Lerner & Lerner, 2010; Marks, 2000; Perdue, Manzeske & Estell, 2009; Veiga, 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010) [23] [78] [10] [79] [15] [80] as an underlying process of school failure and dropout. Henry, Knight and Thomberry (2011) [81] studied the relation between engagement and dropping out- as well as other problematic such as delinquency, offenses and substance use-during early and later adolescence, and early adulthood, evidencing a relation between engagement and dropout, in the expected direction, as well as between engagement and problematic behaviours in each of these developmental periods.

Various studies link school connection and delinquency (Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2003) [82], behavioural problems (Fredricks et al., 2004; Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie & Saylor., 1999) [4] [83] and substance consume (Gutman & Midgley, 2000) [84]. A lower engagement has been associated with conduct problems, while, in contrast, students with higher levels of engagement manifest fewer problems of that nature (Finn & Rock, 1997; Gutman & Midgley, 2000) [73] [84].

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Students' engagement in school arises as a reaction to educators' and general population restlessness to the increase of students alienation, academic motivation decline, high rates of school dropout (Eccles, Midgley, Buchanan, Wigfield, Reuman, MacIver, & Feldlaufer 1993; Finn & Rock 1997; Fredricks et al., 2004) [85] [73] [4] and substance use, mental health decay (Bond et al. 2007) [86], and school results (Marks, 2000; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007) [10] [35]. Globally, the multidimensional nature of the concept *Students Engagement in School* is consensual, being frequently introduced as a meta-construct with two to four dimensions, integrating behavioral, academic, psychological and cognitive components (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012) [3]. It has been proposed an action component (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Veiga, 2012) [16] [15]. Literature also reveals agreement about the fact that engagement components may be influenced by various contextual and personal variables, which, in turn, are likely to trigger different effects.

In what refers to the personal factors, literature shows more differing perspectives. Contextual factors appear to be the ones more favourable to intervention to promote engagement. A number of authors (Wang and Holcombe, 2010; Veiga et al., 2012) [80] [2] suggest that teachers and school psychologists may encourage school identification and belongingness, and stimulate students' participation by making positive appraisals, emphasizing effort instead of results, and promoting a mastery-oriented approach to achievement. The reduced format required for this article has conditioned the amount of information presented and requires further development. Nonetheless, literature review allows highlighting that there is a variety of studies already carried out, with some inconsistencies arising among them, which may be due to the diversity of samples used, as well as with the lack of assessment instruments, with observed reliability and psychometric validity, and representativeness of the multidimensionality of the construct studied. It is suggested that these aspects should be regarded in future studies, either theoretical, or empirical ones.

The context of widespread financial crisis and the need to rethink educational institutions in view of paradigmatic changes makes opportune and imperative to create opportunities of reflection and analysis about education, turning to students' engagement in school as a most important object of study. This concept may assume a central position in education, due to its transdisciplinarity, suggesting a way to address nowadays school's problems. It is expected more research with the intent to answer the following problem: What is the contribution of research, within psychology and

education, to the analysis of the variation found in students engagement in schools, in order to understand its antecedents and consequences, as well as to the study of the complexity that characterizes learning and teaching politics and practices? In short, it will be important to understand which inner and outer forces may have a bonding effect to school and to magnifying students' school engagement, aiming students' personal, social and, later in life fulfilment. We believe that once this is accomplished, we will have happier students and more educational schools. This requires valuing different contributions from research in diverse domains.

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